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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings of a study that examined the ways in which principals' succession practices change as they gain greater experience with entry into different school settings. "Succession" refers to principal transfers to new schools. Data were collected from interviews conducted with five secondary school principals and some of their staffs in two Canadian school districts. The principals were grouped into three categories according to individual career stage--new, midcareer, and senior. Senge's (1990) notion of "creative tension" is used to frame the experience of principals, suggesting that as individuals gain experience, current reality becomes more important and that creative tension (the gap between current reality and vision) eases. Findings indicate that as principals gained experience, they took less extensive risks than those taken by new principals and became better informed by previous practice. The senior principal retreated from risk taking and disengaged himself from innovation, leaving the role of visionary to a vice-principal. A conclusion is that experience with succession may influence the principal's desire to act as an impetus for change and as the developer of creative tension. Two figures are included. (LMI)

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Approaches to Leadership Succession: What comes with experience?*

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School systems often use principal transfers to develop the skills of their in-school administrators (Hart, 1993) and to rejuvenate those principals who may have become complacent in their leadership (Boesse, 1991). The impact of such practices on teachers may, in fact, be the opposite. In those schools which have experienced the coming and going of different principals, teachers become extremely difficult for new principals to engage in changes they may wish to make (Macmillan, 1992). In these schools, teachers are reluctant to invest the time and effort required to implement change, especially when experience has taught them that implementation may come to nought with the appointment of a new principal. This is particularly the case in school systems with policies for the systematic rotation of principals, policies which may be a "fatal remedy" (Sieber, 1971) for fostering change in schools.

Less is known, however, about the long term effects of such rotation policies on principals, themselves. Principals' expectations about school change, one might speculate, become more realistic as their experience increases (Parkay, Currie and Rhodes, 1992). Certainly, novice principals typically are unready for the loneliness of the job and the demands on their time (Duke, Isaacson and Sagor, 1984). But what happens to principals as they gain more and more experience in a variety of settings?

During my investigation of the relationship between school culture and principals' practices at the time of succession, it became evident that each principal in the study reacted

differently to the process of socialization into their new schools. While these differences seemed at least partially due to the particular setting, the principals' previous experiences seemed to be quite influential. This has given rise to the question posed here: How do principals' succession practices change as they gain greater experience with entry into different school settings? This paper will begin to explore possible answers to this question.

METHODOLOGY

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with five secondary school principals and some of their staffs in two school districts. Two of these principals were new to the role, while the other three had experience in at least one other school. Two schools were in the suburbs of a large urban area, while three were in the city itself. Interviews lasted from twenty to forty-five minutes and were tape recorded after permission to do so was granted by each participant. While three of the five interviews were transcribed in their entirety, the two others were reviewed and analyzed using the interview schedule as a framework. Excerpts best representing the general response given to each question were transcribed in their entirety.

The data were examined and analysed in an attempt to isolate the descriptions of the practices used by each principal during the process of entry. If the principal articulated a rationale

for using a particular practice, this rationale was also noted. The data were also coded to signal when changes were made to practice as a result of the influence of the school's culture, or when changes in the culture occured as a result of a practice.

While it is recognized that the sample is too small to be able to make generalizations, some patterns did emerge.

The Principals

When reviewing the data, it became clear that the participants could be grouped into three categories according to the stage of the individual's career. The categories employed here are "New Principals", "Mid-Career Principals" and "The Senior Principal".

New Principals

The first principal in this study had been appointed to a relatively new school the September prior to the interview. Due the growth of the surrounding community and the attractiveness of the arts focus of the school's program, the enrollment had been expanding but was now restricted to approximately 1500 students.

The previous principal had supervised the construction of the building, hired the staff and opened the school six years previously, but he had been transferred as a result of the school district's policy of systematically rotating its principals. While teachers appreciated and liked this principal, they said

they felt the school needed to solidify what had already been established, the talent for which, teachers felt, the founding principal did not have.

The new principal, Beth, had been a professional development consultant in the city prior to moving to her present school district. To be eligible for a principalship in this particular district, she had had to teach in the area and begin the process of having her name placed on the list of possible candidates for a principalship. One of the reasons for her appointment was that her interest in the arts, a rarity among the candidates, matched the specialized focus of the school. When her appointment was announced, both Beth and the staff members involved in the arts program were enthusiatic and excited about the possibilities for the following year.

The interview for the study occured during the early spring of Beth's first year. When asked how she felt she had fared thus far, Beth said:

> You think with all this background that I wouldn't have made any mistakes. I did. I made some mistakes. The initial moving in, I had a plan in mind and I followed it.

To illustrate what she meant, she referred to one incident during which she moved much more quickly than what the staff had anticipated. It began, she said, when she met with department heads and other members of the staff in positions of responsibility to try to develop a sense of the mission of the school and to deal with some concerns which staff had about that

mission. Working with this particular staff became a frustrating exercise for her because previously, "to be different was honoured. I could not get that group to agree on a direct statement". At the end of the day,

> all the undercurrents and disagreements were on the table. I didn't have very much to work for any more. All the things people were discontent about surfaced.

In another illustration, she said she attempted to address teachers' complaints about the students' schedule. Before proceeding, she consulted with and had been advised by the council of department heads of the changes necessary. Unlike the previous principal who was very deliberate in his decision making and who did not act quickly on decisions, Beth moved rapidly to alter the schedule once the decision had been made to do so. What she was not prepared for was the negative reaction from staff to the changes, changes which Beth thought they would welcome. She had not understood that the staff required time to assimilate the implications of changes they requested and to consider that Beth was willing to act on their suggestions. As a consequence, Beth had to reverse her decision, meet with the staff as a whole, work through the problem with them and allow them time to discuss and explore the issue. In the end, she re-instituted her original decision, but this time with the staff's consensus.

When reflecting on this and other situations, and her first year in general, Beth admitted the need to "back-off". While she

still had aspirations for the school based on her original plans, she realized the staff had difficulty with her aggressive attitude toward making decisions. She also recognized the need to work explicitly to help some staff understand that some decisions can be implemented quickly.

In the same school district as Beth, the second new principal, Jim, had been appointed to a school which had a well-developed sense of community among its staff and the approximately 700 students. This community atmosphere was understandably attractive to many teachers on staff who developed a strong sense of identification with the school. Although the nearby city was experiencing a large influx of immigrants, this school was relatively untouched by this change at the time of the study.

Jim had been a vice-principal in the school district prior to his being appointed principal and his reputation of being a well-liked individual had preceded him through the various channels of the teacher network. Unlike Beth who was entering a relatively stable situation, Jim was following a principal, Gordon, who had developed serious medical problems which had affected his performance. According to several teachers, Gordon's condition had contributed to about one-third of the staff leaving the school the year before Jim's arrival.

While Jim brought administrative experience to the job, this experience had not prepared him for feeling overwhelmed nor for the implications of being viewed as the main source of expertise

in the school. Although the interview took place in the spring of Jim's second year, he was still adapting to teachers' conception of the principalship.

> The number of people who look to me for answers still overwhelms me and surprises me and disappoints me sometimes. The answer is available in a myriad of other sources.

Unlike the teachers in Beth's school, this staff had had experience with new principals because the central office administrators had used the school as a training ground for new principals. Consequently, teachers not only took a wait-and-see attitude toward change, but also were quite cynical when changes were proposed by a new principal (Macmillan, 1992). While understanding the need "to try and heal wounds as opposed to mending fences", Jim was faced with the difficult situation of rebuilding the working relationship between staff and administration. During this process of rebuilding, he found marked differences between what he thought was his role as principal and what others thought.

> I've always tried to say "Yes" to teachers. I've found to my horror the job demands I say "No" often. In terms of failure, I might have been better if I had said "No" more often in my first year.

Jim found that being a good principal is knowing when to say "no", and how to do it so that people "walk away unhurt". He said that by trying to please too many people in his first year, he created problems for himself when he was later forced to

refuse requests to which teachers anticipated a positive response. When asked what he had learned, he said:

> I've had to learn what battles are worth fighting and what ones are not. I retreat constantly but never from a piece of ground I think is worth holding.

Both Beth and Jim began with notions of what they should do as principals, notions which they had to modify significantly. In effect, their perceptions of where the boundaries of the role stood were based on their conception of the principalship. As a consequence, Beth and Jim pushed beyond the boundaries established by the teachers and took risks which a more experienced principal may have recognized as not worth taking for the difficulties caused later. Upon reflection, both Beth and Jim were able to pinpoint where their problems lay and were working to solve them.

Mid-Career Principals

Both of the schools administered by mid-career principals were in the same school district and were within the limits of a large metropolitan area. Although built for a relatively stable and homogeneous population, both schools experienced changes in the complexity of the student population caused by immigration.

The first school, like Beth's, was focused on the arts, but had a much longer established program which was recognized throughout the city. The school was also known for its militant staff, a staff sub-divided into small units resembling

"mini-schools" with each mini-school headed by a vice-principal who acted as its principal, administratively.

Jane had come from another school in the system and was recognized by her board as being an experienced and effective principal. Unlike Beth or Jim, Jane knew what to expect in her role as principal and began applying that understanding immediately upon entry into the school. Further, Jane also had a well-developed vision of what a school could be which allowed her to be able to identify gaps quickly. By the spring of her first year, for example, Jane had already had to deal with some difficult issues, one of which was not known to the central office prior to her arrival. She described how she became aware of the problem.

> Interviewer: How did you become aware of the problem in the math department? Like, you were a new principal, how?
>
> Principal: By talking. I met with the, each of the heads. There're three heads, like three leaders, and talking and listening to what they had to say. And they, in their meetings, they never talked about general levels; they never talked about Grade 9 and 10; they never talked about the kids falling through the cracks; they never talked about kids at risk; they never talked about math education and where it should be going and what's the matter with it. And so they alerted me to the fact that they didn't see it as a problem.
>
> Interviewer: So it was what they didn't say, not what they said.
>
> Principal: Yeah. And then they talked about how wonderful they were and how wonderful it was. And yet, I've talked, I know from meeting with kids and parents and staff that math is really tough for kids here.

Jane understood that what was not discussed was as important as what was. She understood that teachers might avoid issues which were difficult to handle, and she listened for these gaps in the discussions which teachers had about students and instruction.

While dealing with the issue in the math department, Jane was still able to keep her vision of what she wanted for the school clear in her mind. It was toward this vision which she worked. She recognized that the task was difficult and that it should not be confused with some corporate image of vision-building.

> So I know as I deal with today's crisis, I do have an idea of the kind of staff I want teaching and the kind of fair break I want for kids. So, it comes from what I know, it comes from what I think about, but it comes from what I hear people out there say. Like, I go out and I seek out the people I think are really good, who're doing a good job with kids. And I listen to them and then try to pull that together or try to get them working on other people and pulling them together. And, I don't know, can you go in a school and say "This is my vision", and all of a sudden, like Proctor and Gamble, you've got them all organized and away they go? And I'm not even sure they do that at Proctor and Gamble or Xerox or anywhere else.

Unlike Beth who tried to institute changes based on what she perceived as a problem and on what she thought were her prerogatives as principal, Jane demonstrated here that she was aware of the difficulty of making quick decisions. The development of a common vision, as Jane understood it, was something toward which the principal must work by drawing people together and which could not be imposed.

Later she discussed a "Blocker" who was opposed to change, but who was also on her administrative team of vice-principals. She talked about the need to recognize that there are different personalities in a school which might not mesh, that there are people with different and sometimes opposing agendas, and that "choreography" is necessary even to achieve small gains.

The second mid-career principal, Paul, was responsible for a school of about 650 students. While the school had been the focus of a neighbourhood when it was built, the children in the area had moved away. The parents had stayed. This meant that many children came from outside the immediate vicinity and were drawn to the school's international studies program. Just prior to Paul's arrival, many of teachers had left the school and those who remained were actively involved in the activities of the school.

Although originally slated to be principal in another school, Paul's appointment was changed at the insistence of the local school board member who refused to accept the appointment of an inexperienced principal. While this alteration required Paul to rethink his entry, he said that he was actually pleased with this change of plans.

> There are some things that I find personally pleasing about this school and maybe fit something that I feel fundamentally about secondary schools. And that is, that they're far too big on the whole, that there has to be a sense of family, a sense of friendliness, sense of community within the school environment.

Paul's experience with secondary schools was evident. To be a principal of a large school risked the role of principal being reduced to an administrative functionary. Just keeping people apprised of all they needed to know was difficult in such settings. For him, small schools, unlike large schools, allowed more opportunities for staff members to work collaboratively together across departments which could result in a more caring environment for students and staff. He saw evidence of this among the teachers of his present school through "a lot of covering of people for each other, and I think that's very, very healthy in a school".

When he was interviewed in late spring, he had not been able to be in the school as much as he had wanted, nor had he been as involved as he had wished. This was due to previous commitments of which the school board was aware. As a consequence, Paul had to curb his desire for and involvement in change until the following year.

> There's some very strong views I have about how schools should operate and in many respects we operate in relation, in respect to some of those, but not all of those. And other things I would like to do, I just sat over here and said "No, no, I'm going to spend some time." Like I can take initiatives and help some members pursue initiatives, but there may be some fundamental changes that I'm going to leave until next year.

While Paul's lack of involvement was problematic for him and for some inexperienced staff members who felt they needed Paul's support, it did allow him time to examine the organization of the school and focus on ideas for improvement. One such idea was

based on his vision of the school as a community and what was needed to create it. One method he proposed to use to accomplish this was to increase the number of staff meetings to once a month. While promising to keep these meetings short, Paul felt this change was necessary to allow teachers and administrators more opportunities to have open interchanges about the school and about issues which needed to be addressed.

Both Jane and Paul demonstrated a realistic understanding of the functioning of schools and of the principal's responsibilities. But these understandings amounted to a narrower or more modest perspective on secondary schools and the principal's role as compared with the perspective held by the new principals, Beth and Jim.

The Senior Principal

Fred was responsible for a large composite school which included students taking technology courses as well as those students preparing for university. Unlike the other principals, Fred was very familiar with his new school because he had been a teacher there 18 years before. As a result, he was familiar with the building, the programs being taught, the student population that the school served, and with many of the older staff with whom he had taught. Fred differed from the other principals in the study most obviously in respect to the degree of conservatism which he demonstrated. Although his risk-taking in introducing

change was minimal, he was responsive to previous initiatives already underway and fostered their continuation. As he said:

> You have to find where Sam [the previous principal] was at and then put my own philosophy on it. I don't want to go in and turn something around totally that Sam has just put into place either because he's probably worked three or four years towards that.

Unspoken here seems to be a belief that changes to what had been introduced would have been challenged by the staff as well as a waste of his predecessor's time and effort. There was also a sense that Fred wanted to maintain continuity with the past and not disrupt the flow of present activities.

Part of the reason for Fred's reaction in his new appointment might have been his experience in similar settings elsewhere. He seemed to have a deep understanding of how secondary schools in general, and composite schools in particular, functioned.

> In fact, all of my experiences as an administrator has been in composite schools. [Lists 5 other composite schools in which he had been a principal.] So I've only ever been an administrator in composite schools. So I felt comfortable in a composite school situation.

His experience also meant that he had less at stake in terms of his career than a new principal just starting out. Fred gave the impression that he knew what requests to refuse and when, on what issues he could not be flexible, and who to involve in the resolution of these issues. In sum, he had a clear sense of his role and of what that role required of him.

> I guess I always have the total right of refusal. If I saw them going in a direction that, it was something I just couldn't support, I couldn't live with, I'd just have to say "I'm sorry, there's no way I can support that". But if it's a matter of two or three ways they could go on a certain thing, and I might have my own thoughts about the way I'd like to go on it, then I'm prepared to live with whatever one is chosen by the group.

Fred also knew the importance of delegating to others, something he learned during his years as a principal. What became evident in discussing the school with him as well as with other members of his administrative team, was that Fred was less overtly involved in implementing innovation than he was in providing the circumstances for others to assume that responsibility. He recognized that trying to do everything by oneself was the natural tendency for many people, especially new principals.

> They might try to do everything themselves, for example, not delegate well, having been used to having stuff delegated to them by the principal.... And I have a little of that disease as well, where I have a tendency. First thing is to say "What can I do with that?", instead of the first thing saying, "Okay, who should be looking after that?" I've improved on that instead of what I used to be. When I used to be new, used to do it yourself kind of thing. But with four vice-principals, if you do that you have to be crazy. You have the strength of four here.

There is a certain sense of serenity in Fred's disengagement from the feeling he has to solve all of the school's problems himself. He has seen it all: he has had similar problems elsewhere; he has experienced the various types of people and how they respond; he has been involved in the implementation of change in other settings; he has heard the complaints when issues

arise; and he knows how far his authority stretches. He did not appear to want to take risks. Risks were for others still building their careers.

Discussion

How do we begin to frame the expereince of these individuals in order to develop some sense of the life cycle of principals? One possibility is to use Senge's notion of creative tension. He suggests that between what is (current reality) and what can be (vision) is a distance which he calls "creative tension". (See Figure 1.) How this creative tension is resolved is important.

> There are only two possible ways for the tension to resolve itself: pull reality toward vision or pull the vision toward reality. (Senge, 1990: p. 150)

Insert Figure 1 about here.

I would suggest that as individuals gain experience, current reality becomes more important; people have an increasingly clearer concept of the barriers faced in moving towards their vision. I would also suggest that the creative tension between vision and reality eases as individuals gain a clearer sense of what is achievable given the time and resources in a given context. By using these ideas as a framework, the principals in this study can be placed within this framework and some implications for schools can be seen. (See Figure 2.)

Insert Figure 2 about here.

New Principals

The gap between vision and current reality for new principals seems to be similar to what Sarason (1972) describes when discussing the socialization of leaders during the creation of new settings. He says that the theorist and the practitioner have views of the same process but from different vantage points, and both are correct to the extent that they explain what is happening. New principals seem to react like theorists who are suddenly confronted with the application of their theories, and find that their theories have only limited use in the everyday operation of schools. While new principals are willing to take risks in order to move towards their vision of the school, but which are based on their limited experience and understanding of schools and of the role of principal, they find themselves having to learn what is actually possible to achieve, given the nature of their new understanding of schools.

Beth and Jim were examples of this. While both had had extensive experience in various administrative roles, they had to modify what they believed was possible and base their new understanding on the current reality of their practice. Generally, teachers seemed to provide a "honeymoon" period (Warren, 1989), and were accepting of some of the errors which

these novices made. But it was clear to both new principals, that they were risking their credibility as leaders if they did not soon learn which practices were acceptable and which were not (Roberts and Wright, 1989).

A positive aspect of new principals is that they cause people to re-examine, to some extent, the possibility of implementing change and taking risks in an attempt to achieve the vision which new principals place before them. This emphasizes what Senge (1990) calls generative learning, learning which can lead people to move beyond mere adaptation to the present modes of performance and to see possibilities not previously considered. Both Beth and Jim seemed to ask the question "Why can't this happen?" instead of accepting what they were told was possible. In both schools, this vision of what could be and sense of "what if" produced a feeling of excitement when teachers discussed the changes which the principals were responsible for implementing.

Mid-career Principals

As principals gain experience, the risks taken appear to be less extensive in nature than those risks taken by new principals and are better informed by previous practice. Mid-career principals transport, from one setting to another, a set of beliefs about schools and the nature of teaching which they apply and modify to suit the new school. While risks are within boundaries and are less flamboyant, the changes which are

embarked upon are more grounded in current reality and seem to be more suited to the school and are likely to succeed. In Sarason's (1972) terms, the practitioner and the theoretician moved closer to a common understanding of schools and what was practicable.

Both Jane and Paul began by establishing for themselves what the current realities of their schools were by discussing the school's past with various individuals and by using their experience to plan changes which they wished to introduce. In Jane's case, the change was a re-examination of how subjects were taught, especially to Grade 9 level students. She used her understanding of schools by pinpointing some specific problem areas to be targetted and strategies to be used in their resolution. Behind her actions was her vision of what, for her, constituted a school which focused on the best instruction for all.

For Paul, although his initiatives were on hold, he was able to begin to develop plans based on his belief in and the positive traits of small schools. While his initial innovation was not programmatic nor much of a risk, it was designed to assist in implementing his vision of future programmatic changes by establishing communication between staff and himself.

Mid-career principals seem to have a clearer concept of what exists and what is possible, given this understanding. In effect, they are able to proceed to implement their vision which

is based on the current reality of the school and do so in a fashion which is likely to succeed.

Senior Principals

According to Huberman (1992), as teachers progress through their careers and gain a deeper sense of their profession, they begin to achieve a sense of professional disengagement which may be either bitter or serene.

> The tone is mostly positive: a gradual disengaging from investment in one's work to other engagements, and from "instrumental" concerns to more reflective pursuits. (Huberman, 1992; p. 126).

Even though principals begin their careers as teachers, aspects of the principalship are very different and, unlike teachers, principals may not be able to become entirely disengaged from their involvement in their school, either through inclination or permission.

Principals with extensive experience of various school settings, then, may appear to take few or no risks when implementing change. In fact, experience may substitute understanding and predictive abilities for risk taking, leaving to others those risks which may be required to implement change. In Fred's case, this was certainly true. While involved in the process, Fred was on the periphery instead of at the centre of the discussions and debates surrounding the implementation of innovations. In the interview, he had a very relaxed, disengaged attitude toward change. For him, responsibility for increasing

the creative tension in the school was left to the initiative of one of his vice-principals.

Given what we know of teachers and what was found in this limited study, senior principals appear to know what boundaries exist for their role, where these boundaries are, and what can be done in schools as a consquence. Although retreating from risk taking and becoming somewhat disengaged from innovation, they may provide the opportunity for others to assume the role of visionary.

Implications and Questions for Further Study

Like players of the child's game of musical chairs, the sense of excitement with which principals begin their careers seems to become tempered as experience and the reality of schools intrude. If this does indeed happen, then experience with succession may impact on the principal's desire to become the impetus for change and the developer of the "creative tension" which Senge (1990) believes is necessary for organizations of the future.

To understand more fully what the impact of experience has on principals, a more extensive investigation with a larger group of principals at various stages of their careers needs to be conducted. Some of the questions which might be asked are: As principals progress through their careers, do principals become disengaged as teachers do? Do principals, in fact, reduce the risks they take in implementing change as they acquire more

experience, or are the risks more tempered and less grand in scope? If this is the case, what are the implications for the introduction of innovation?

Figure 1: Senge's (1990) View of Learning

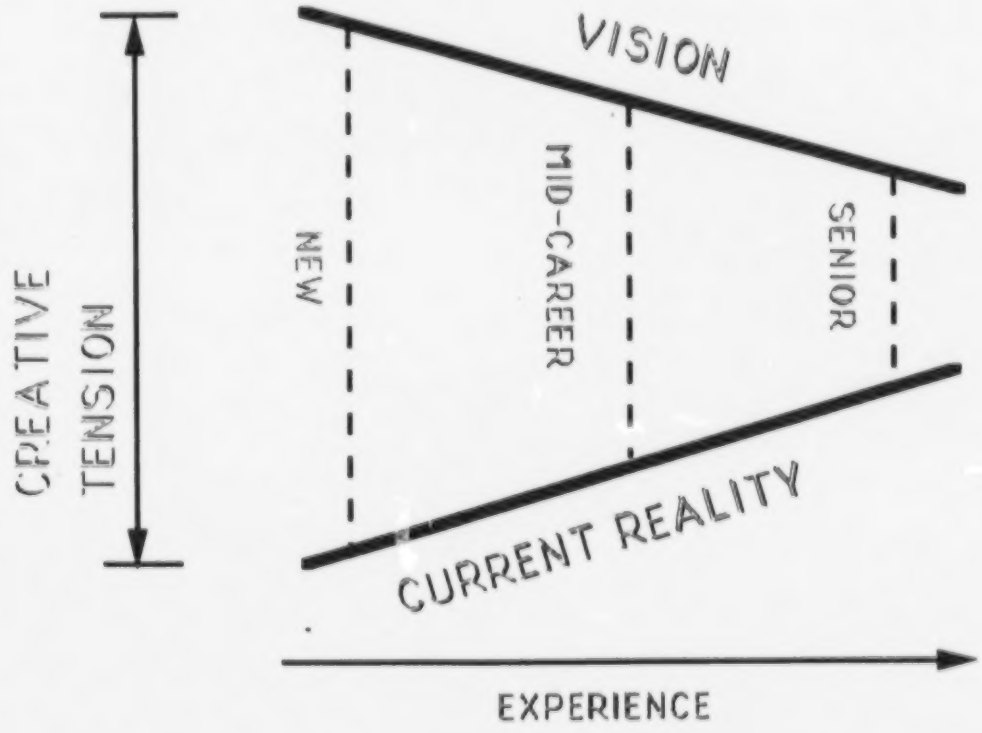

Figure 2: Relationship between principals' life cycle and creative tension

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